

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
HOUSE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON TRIBAL AFFAIRS**

April 15, 2021

8:02 a.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Representative Tiffany Zulkosky, Chair  
Representative Dan Ortiz  
Representative Zack Fields  
Representative Geran Tarr  
Representative Mike Cronk

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

All members present

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

PRESENTATION(S): RURAL PUBLIC SAFETY UPDATE

- HEARD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

No previous action to record

**WITNESS REGISTER**

APAY'UK MOORE

Aleknagik, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Provided invited testimony during the presentation on rural public safety.

JAMES COCKRELL, Commissioner Designee

Department of Public Safety (DPS)

Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Provided invited testimony during the presentation on rural public safety.

LEONARD WALLNER, VPSO Program Manager & Coordinator

Chugachimiut

Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Provided invited testimony during the presentation on rural public safety.

VIVIAN KORTHUIS, Chief Executive Officer

Association of Village Council Presidents (AVCP)  
Bethel, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Provided invited testimony during the presentation on rural public safety.

JASON WILSON, Public Safety Manager, VPSO Program  
Central Council of Tlingit & Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Provided invited testimony during the presentation on rural public safety.

#### **ACTION NARRATIVE**

[8:02:21 AM](#)

**CHAIR TIFFANY ZULKOSKY** called the House Special Committee on Tribal Affairs meeting to order at 8:02 a.m. Representatives Cronk, Ortiz, and Zulkosky were present at the call to order. Representatives Fields and Tarr arrived as the meeting was in progress.

#### **PRESENTATION(S): Rural Public Safety Update**

[8:03:00 AM](#)

CHAIR ZULKOSKY announced that the only order of business would be invited testimony on the topic of rural public safety [provided by Ms. Apay'uk Moore, Commissioner James Cockrell, Mr. Leonard Wallner, Ms. Vivian Korthuis, and Mr. James Wilson]. She requested the first invited witness, Ms. Moore, to state the name of her community.

[8:04:04 AM](#)

APAY'UK MOORE, stated she is from the community of Aleknagik. Responding further to Chair Zulkosky, she said the village of Aleknagik has under 300 full-time residents year-round, is located 20 miles outside of Dillingham and 350 air miles from Anchorage and is accessed by plane or road from Dillingham.

CHAIR ZULKOSKY inquired about the existing public safety presence within Aleknagik and Ms. Moore's experience on the night described in her written testimony, provided to committee members, when she had to call for public safety support.

MS. MOORE responded that presently there is no public safety despite Aleknagik being just a 30-minute drive from Dillingham

which has a police department and an Alaska State Troopers post. She related that according to the city council it is hard to find applicants, and explained it is difficult for a local person to occupy that position given the social dynamics and controversies that arise when punishing community members who are in close-knit families. She said it was an awakening experience when she dialed 911 and was told she could not be helped because she was out of city limits, nor could her call be transferred to the next possible safety option. Instead, while shaking and terrified as the man circled her house trying to get in, she had to find a pen and paper to write down the phone number for the troopers. She stated it was a sobering moment to realize how self-reliant she was going to have to be.

8:07:39 AM

CHAIR ZULKOSKY asked whether a public safety official was able to appear at Ms. Moore's home following this break-in attempt.

MS. MOORE answered, "No, not that night." She said she was able to contact neighbors who then helped help fix the window that was broken by the intruder and clear the area to make sure the intruder wasn't hiding in the basement or near the house. Another neighbor invited her to stay at their place, she stated, at which point she shut down the house and left.

CHAIR ZULKOSKY inquired about Ms. Moore's later conversations with a trooper.

MS. MOORE replied she had several interactions; the one described in her testimony was over the phone and the trooper later came to her property. During the initial phone call, she related, she felt unheard and stereotyped as emotional even though she tried to portray herself as an educated individual and urged the trooper to not stereotype and demean her. The trooper's demeanor changed when he later saw her in person, she stated, because she has brown hair and light skin and doesn't look Native. As she walked around with the trooper, she was in disbelief at the victim blaming and being told she shouldn't have windows and shouldn't have equipment visible. The point in having the trooper there, she continued, was because someone had broken into her house, not to have a property evaluation of what she was doing wrong and what she was doing to make herself appealing to criminals.

8:11:20 AM

CHAIR ZULKOSKY shared that she and Ms. Moore recently discussed that it doesn't necessarily mean there needs to be more public safety or law enforcement individuals available in a community. She requested Ms. Moore's perspective on what types of resources or considerations should or could be made to improve the experience she had while seeking support in what felt like a life endangering moment.

MS. MOORE responded that for preventative measures, it isn't necessarily that more law enforcement is needed. She related that people in Igiugig, a remote village with no public safety officer, have told her that Igiugig's strategy is to let people know they are not going to be tolerated if they conduct themselves in ways that are not contributing to the community. She related that the trooper said people in rural Alaska must be as self-reliant as possible, and while she understands that, she questioned why troopers are based in these rural locations as false pillars for safety. She questioned why, if people in a community must defend themselves, they are not being helped to organize a backup safety plan instead of being given phone numbers advertised to call for safety. Phone trees have been mentioned, she said, but there have been no meetings to help people understand that. She suggested that if there isn't funding for full-time jobs for people to be living in the communities, then annual self-defense classes should be offered.

MS. MOORE continued her response. She noted that the person attacking her home was a young man. Studies have shown, she pointed out, that recreational activities can be preventative for youth getting into trouble and choosing a criminal path. Ensuring that communities have safe basketball courts, among other things, costs less than full salaries. She pointed out that in her specific experience everything was wrong: 911 was wrong, the training she received to call for help failed, and no one was punished for the crime.

CHAIR ZULKOSKY requested Commissioner Cockrell to provide his invited testimony and an update on the work that the Department of Public Safety has been doing on rural public safety since his appointment

[8:16:24 AM](#)

JAMES COCKRELL, Commissioner Designee, Department of Public Safety (DPS), provided invited testimony during the presentation on rural public safety. He stated that he came to the committee to listen because to make things better the needs of the people

being served must be known; it cannot be based solely on what DPS thinks as a department. He applauded Ms. Moore's courage to come forward with testimony and documentation about her encounter with the Alaska State Troopers, and said he is disappointed she had a negative encounter because the department needs to strive to leave a victim and even those who are arrested with a positive feeling.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL specified that rural law enforcement in Alaska is a difficult task for state troopers and village public safety officers (VPSOs). He said he has been to Aleknagik and is familiar with the region and that at one time there was a VPSO. He stated that law enforcement in Alaska's villages, whether troopers or VPSOs, does matter and there most likely would have been a response had there been a VPSO.

8:19:28 AM

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL expressed his commitment to improving DPS services in rural Alaska because rural law enforcement is the heart and soul of Alaska State Troopers and is why there is an Alaska State Troopers. He stated that over the years Alaska State Troopers has gotten tied up in the growth of the urban areas, which has taken some resources away from rural Alaska. The Alaska State Troopers represent rural Alaska and the state's government, and when troopers show up to a village it is a ray of hope that the crime will be solved, and the perpetrator will be taken out of the village.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL related that DPS wants troopers to go to a village to interact and spend time, not just to arrest someone. He explained that sometimes it's difficult because the caseloads are heavy, especially in the Yukon-Kuskokwim (YK) Delta. Many troopers are in "hub areas" so that they can spread out with aircraft and vessels to get to the villages. Finding the infrastructure to house the VPSOs and even providing telephone and internet services is difficult, he continued, which is probably one reason for the high turnover rate. He reiterated his commitment to improving the professional law enforcement of Alaska State Troopers in rural Alaska and reiterated that he is sorry about Ms. Moore's experience with the agency.

8:22:34 AM

REPRESENTATIVE FIELDS thanked the commissioner for his service and commitment. He noted the decline in [the number of] VPSOs and inquired about the commissioner's vision for ultimately

having public safety in every community. He further inquired about exploring other options, such as partnerships with tribal entities to empower local communities if the state cannot provide law enforcement. He offered his hope for setting a goal of law enforcement in every community.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL replied that in addition to VPSOs the department runs the academies for village police officers. He stated that if funding can be found, there is a lot of room to get tribal police officers to at least handle the tribal aspects of violations since each tribe has its culture and sets of rules to follow. He related that former Governor Parnell's goal was to put 120 VPSOs on the ground; the number got up to 116 but then there were cuts in the VPSO Program and it became hard to start recruiting VPSOs. He advised that a look needs to be taken at different avenues to entice VPSOs to stay on the job, as well as increasing VPSO salaries because they live in villages where things are more expensive and must often fund their own housing and own phones. Commissioner Cockrell pointed out that VPSO training is at the Alaska State Trooper Academy, which provides consistency when doing investigations, gives troopers and municipal police officers a better understanding of what the VPSO Program is and lets them integrate and engage prior to graduating from the academy, and puts the VPSO on more equal ground with the trooper. He said he hopes this can continue, but a way needs to be found to keep up the numbers. He noted that village police officers provide vital roles in their villages but are not actually police officers under Alaska police standards because they don't meet the qualifications, which affects what they are allowed to do. While there are options, Commissioner Cockrell continued, everybody will need to think out of the box to figure out the best option. It is imperative to include nonprofits, tribes, and villages, he added, because they are the ones being affected by either having or not having law enforcement.

8:27:59 AM

REPRESENTATIVE ORTIZ pointed out that Ketchikan has both trooper and city police protection, whereas Hydaburg doesn't presently have a VPSO, and the closest trooper is a good distance away in Craig. He asked whether there is a prioritization that says where the department's limited resources will be deployed to provide the overall best protection possible.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL responded that the department does not have a strategic map which says how DPS resources are to be

prioritized; rather he equates it to a chessboard where DPS is always moving things around. There is no continuity, he stated, for example in the last four years he has worked under five commissioners and since he left there have been three colonels. Without that continuity it's hard to have a strategy, he explained, plus there is the yearly cycle of budgets where DPS never knows what its yearly budget is going to be. For example, one year while he was a colonel \$10 million was cut and 32 trooper positions had to be eliminated in less than a year. Therefore, he advised, it is hard to sit down with an objective strategy to decide where the department's resources are, so a lot of it comes from the call volumes. While he was colonel, he continued, he pulled the troopers out of the Seward Highway to Girdwood, he didn't fill the trooper position in Haines based on crime status statistics, and Ketchikan has been discussed. Commissioner Cockrell said he has about 44 troopers in the Matanuska-Susitna Valley and as that area grows the call volumes go up; more cases were handled per trooper in the Matanuska-Susitna Valley than per trooper anywhere else in the state. The bottom line, he advised, is that DPS doesn't have a strategy, the department takes the information available, and a lot is reactive, and it changes yearly.

8:34:07 AM

REPRESENTATIVE ORTIZ asked whether there has been any historical ability for the troopers to communicate on a regular basis with municipalities to work together and cooperate on an overall strategy. He further asked whether there are any tools available to get a better participation from local communities that choose not to have local municipal police and so rely totally on state troopers for their public safety, where other communities choose to pitch in with support and city police.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL answered he doesn't have the authority to tell a community that it must provide police services and tax its citizens. He said the department certainly works closely with its local partners; for example, DPS supports the Anchorage Police Department (APD) from helicopters to investigative tools and brings the APD's crime techs into the DPS crime lab. The City of Wasilla, he continued, picks the low crime areas of the city, which leaves the Alaska State Troopers having to spend a substantial amount of time dealing with the other areas. Wasilla and Palmer could expand their city limit, but nobody wants to pay taxes, and for Ketchikan there could be borough police. Soldotna and Kenai could certainly look at expanding their city limits; Soldotna is trying to do this but is being

fought hard. He said that if at some point the state wants to [give that authority] the legislature and governor will have to push that, but until then DPS will still provide free service to most of the state.

8:38:40 AM

REPRESENTATIVE TARR, regarding retention and providing housing for recruitment, pointed out that [federal] recovery funds have been talked about as jobs bills, so it seems like a strategic opportunity and priority for a public safety investment that also puts people back to work. She suggested the committee write a letter in this regard. She recalled the commissioner stating that at one point the state had 116 VPSOs during the time when the goal was 120 and asked where that number is at today. She further asked what the commissioner has been able to do in terms of adding troopers.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL replied that to get troopers and VPSOs to the villages and smaller communities they must have adequate housing. He said the department has a state housing program where DPS manages housing in rural areas for its troopers. Much of the housing is not acceptable compared to what troopers are used to living in. The only way the department can entice its troopers to go to rural areas is to have adequate support for them when they get there, which includes housing for their families. Since he started with the department in 1983, he related, DPS has struggled with adequate housing in rural areas, and so has the VPSO Program. He said the Alaska State Troopers could not function without the VPSO Program, and he is super supportive of the VPSO Program because it is mission-critical to the department. He said DPS has 52 VPSOs and he can provide the committee with a list of the communities with VPSOs.

8:42:44 AM

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL, responding further to Representative Tarr, said the department still struggles with recruiting. Last year DPS hired 36 new troopers and 33 left for a net gain of three. Currently, he continued, 200 are "in the hopper" but to get a class of 20-30 DPS needs between 800 and 1,200 recruits signed up and going through the process. The department lost \$3 million this year, so didn't fill all its trooper positions. The department must have significant and consistent funding, he advised, for DPS to plan to hire troopers. Given the cost of training a trooper, the best thing is to retain that trooper by taking care of the quality-of-life issues. He explained that



the more troopers DPS has on the road or in the field, the higher their quality of life when they are off duty. Otherwise, they are working lots of overtime, are on standby, and overloaded with cases, so they become report writers and are not adequately investigating the crimes. This is especially seen in the Matanuska-Susitna Valley. This needs to be fixed and the only way to fix it is to have consistent funding, he stressed. A retirement system needs to be brought back for Alaska's troopers or law enforcement. Commissioner Cockrell related that in everybody's career, including his own, there are dark periods of struggle and what keeps everyone going is knowing that in 25-30 years they can retire, along with knowing that if injured on the job they will be taken care of. But that isn't had right now, he pointed out, and that needs to get fixed.

8:45:53 AM

REPRESENTATIVE ORTIZ inquired about the roadblocks for those VPSOs who have the legal right to carry a weapon in their duties, but somehow in the process are not allowed to carry a weapon even though they have the legal right to do so.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL confirmed there is a law to carry firearms but said there is a process. He explained that, first, the agency sponsoring the VPSO must decide that it's willing to take the liability risk to arm its VPSO because the liabilities go way up. Then, by law, the VPSO must go through a psychological test which entails a process for DPS to make that happen, a process with which DPS struggles. He stated that DPS is not trying to hinder the VPSO's ability to carry a firearm. If he was a VPSO in a village, he added, he would want to carry a firearm because pretty much everybody in Alaska is armed. He recounted that when he was a colonel, maybe two of the 50-plus VPSOs were armed. He further explained that DPS must engage the not-for-profits to ensure they are on board with assuming a lot more risk because VPSOs are not state employees.

REPRESENTATIVE ORTIZ took the commissioner's answer to mean that the local providers must be willing to take on a greater liability risk, so ultimately a greater financial burden for liability insurance. He surmised this to be the main roadblock.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL deferred to Jason Wilson for an answer. He said that when an organization provides a firearm its liabilities, costs, and potential for lawsuits go up.

8:49:40 AM

REPRESENTATIVE CRONK shared that when he was a teacher, he welcomed troopers into the school to show students that the troopers are humans. He said the question is how to get local people to want to do those VPSO jobs, and related that some of the most successful troopers he has seen were the ones living in and involved with the community and who provided a positive presence. While the nationwide view of police is not very good, he said, Alaska's troopers and police force are held in high esteem. He suggested that for housing the state should partner with the villages and regional corporations to build the housing and then the state leases the buildings. Building the housing would provide jobs in the villages, he added, and would be a win-win because [the villages or corporations] would still own the building rather than the state.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL responded that troopers in the field are the best recruiters because they have [personal] contact. He said most of the housing in rural areas is leased from local people in the villages, rather than the state owning them.

[8:53:33 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE FIELDS thanked the commissioner for his comprehensive vision on getting adequate enforcement in the field through workload, quality of life, housing, and retirement [benefits]. He asked whether as much as possible is being done to recruit from across the state, and whether the commissioner sees opportunities for improvement so that DPS employees are as reflective of the state as possible. He concurred Alaskans support their police and troopers and said he would like the strongest recruitment program possible.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL answered that the goal is to obtain a trooper force that is reflective of Alaska's population, and to do that recruitment must be from within. He related that when he went through the academy in 1983 there were 38 recruits, and all were Alaska residents. That has changed over the years probably due largely to economic reasons, he advised. Alaskans are not stepping up to be Alaska State Troopers and a fix for that needs to be found.

[8:55:10 AM](#)

CHAIR ZULKOSKY noted that there has recently been a tenuous bright line, whether intentional or unintentional, that seems to indicate a stark difference of perspective within DPS between

state troopers and VPSOs, particularly with the department having so many resources while VPSOs can only get so much. She offered her hope that the bright line will grow dim with Commissioner Cockrell's leadership and commitment to the VPSO Program, and that there will be a shared interest between the state and the tribal non-profits managing these programs and employing the VPSOs. She requested the commissioner to speak to his vision of how to improve that dynamic of VPSOs not being DPS employees but helping to carry out the [DPS] mission.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL replied that there is always going to be inherent conflict whenever there are two competing agencies. He said it is important that the department communicate openly and honestly with the non-profits running the VPSO Program. The department is responsible for providing the funding to the VPSO Program as well as for auditing the program, he added. The sticking point between DPS and all the not-for-profits is how much money DPS is going to give them and how DPS is going to give them the money. He recounted that the department used to have one coordinator in Anchorage overseeing the program, but it has since been decentralized and now it is the responsibility of individual detachments. The biggest key is understanding that both have important missions that are interconnected all the time, he continued. The department is kind of the big brother given its statutory authority within the state, and DPS must ensure it is treating the VPSOs with respect and giving them the needed support, including financially. He stated that it would be his preference if the funding went directly from the legislature to each of the nonprofits if that is legal. That way, he continued, the nonprofits would know upfront how much money they are going to get, and it takes DPS out of being the agency they must come to every time they want to buy something.

CHAIR ZULKOSKY thanked Commissioner Cockrell. She then asked Mr. Leonard Wallner to provide his invited testimony.

9:00:29 AM

LEONARD WALLNER, VPSO Program Manager & Coordinator, Chugachimiut, provided invited testimony during the presentation on rural public safety. He stated that Chugachimiut is an Alaska Native nonprofit organization representing Prince William Sound and Lower Cook Inlet. He said the region's four villages, communities of 300 or less people, are served by village public safety officers (VPSOs), with two of the positions filled and two vacant. One of the two VPSOs is from the region, and one is not, which is the typical 50 percent threshold. The strong

preference is for local hire, and this was the case in the early years of the program which started in 1979, he continued. But today's reality is that that's no longer the case, which gets back to the 50 percent threshold.

MR. WALLNER explained that one of the several reasons for the difficulty in recruiting someone from the community to be the VPSO is family relationships. Villages typically are small and there are family dynamics involved when a lot of folks are related to each other. Another reason, he said, is that the required training to become a certified VPSO is 16 weeks long, which is a long time for folks to be gone from home, especially with needing to tend to their families and the tribulations that go on when they are not there. He recounted that about nine years ago the VPSO academy was eight weeks long at the DPS academy in Sitka. Another commissioner then broke it into three segments of five weeks, three weeks, and two weeks, which increased the cost of travel significantly even though the periods of time away from home were shorter. Now the academy is 16 weeks, which has its pros and cons, he continued. The VPSOs train at the DPS academy with the troopers and come away with the same training that the troopers and municipal officers receive.

[9:04:27 AM](#)

MR. WALLNER stated that a limited pool of applicants is another reason for difficulty in local recruitment - there are only so many eligible people in the communities and people are not coming forth saying that this is the job they want. He said cultural barriers are yet another reason for difficulty in local recruitment. Language can be an issue because English is not always the first language in the communities. Another hurdle that can be difficult to overcome, he continued, is that the Alaska Native culture is more of a hands-on type of learning environment as opposed to the academy's focus on classroom and bookwork. He pointed out that community avoidance is another issue because becoming the VPSO is also becoming the police officer and so the person tends to become shunned. Someone throwing a party in their house is not going to invite the cop to come over.

MR. WALLNER said another hurdle is the unarmed aspect of the position. While the statute problems on that were lifted in 2014, he stated, seven years later it really falls more so upon the employers, the nonprofits. The Chugachimiut board of directors has taken a firm position that VPSOs historically have

never been armed and the board has no desire to arm its VPSOs now. Applicants have come to Chugachimiut who are retired or spent time with another agency, he related, and not being armed changes the perspective on whether they want to do the job.

9:08:09 AM

MR. WALLNER discussed public safety challenges, of which first and foremost is the remoteness of the communities. For example, he noted, transportation to two of Chugachimiut's villages is once or twice a week unless an airplane is chartered or someone has their own boat, plus weather can play into that. He cited an event in one of the Chugachimiut communities where a public safety emergency occurred, and the entire village had to go into lockdown. At the time there was no VPSO in the community and it took the troopers 19-23 hours to get there, meanwhile the folks in the community are fearing for their safety. Mr. Wallner pointed out that there are also cultural misunderstandings and acceptance - there is language, subsistence, and foods. He said the councils in the region are selective, which they have a right to be, about who comes in to be the VPSO because it has to be someone who has somewhat of an understanding of their culture and how they live and accepting of that. As the coordinator, he added, he tends to hand pick who these people are going to be. Housing is a major issue, he stressed. For example, in one of the communities the best he can do is a studio apartment, which creates a limitation to applicants who are single or have only a significant other. He said fresh water is another issue, with three of Chugachimiut's villages having had freshwater shortages in the last three years and bottled water had to be sent in until the problem was fixed. Urban amenities don't exist, he continued. Essentially all that exists is the houses, the school, the post office, and the tribal office. Two of the villages don't have stores. Groceries must be ordered from online and come in on the once- or twice-a-week plane. So, he stated, it isn't an easy way of life, which gets back to why subsistence becomes so important. The communities are not rich, they have a limited amount of funding, they help as best they can, which is why they rely so much on the VPSO program.

9:12:46 AM

MR. WALLNER addressed the topic of opportunities for the VPSO. He reported that the present VPSO starting salary is \$26.79 an hour as compared to the public safety profession's statewide mean average of \$32-\$34 an hour. He pointed out that while \$26.79 is decent pay for the community, there is the high cost

of living in the village. Being a VPSO, he added, is one of the better jobs in the village for the most part. Regarding the 50 percent pool where 50 percent of the people are not from the community, he explained that loyalty or tie to community does not exist nearly as well. For example, he said, it's not uncommon for someone to get trained and certified and then another job offer comes from a larger community that is better for the person and the person's family, which creates attrition.

MR. WALLNER stated that the VPSO is a perfect fit for the community, and it was designed to work in the communities. While law enforcement is the primary function of Alaska State Troopers, he said, VPSOs are not only law enforcement but also receive training in fighting fires, search and rescue, and as emergency trauma technicians. Additionally, he continued, VPSOs may serve as off-road Division of Motor Vehicle (DMV) license examiners and lay vaccinators; provide welfare checks, animal control, elder assistance, and emergency planning; and be involved with school resource officers (SROs).

MR. WALLNER shared that he retired from the Alaska State Troopers after 25 years of service. He said he first started working with the VPSO Program in 1995 as an oversight out of St. Mary's, and for the last nine years of his trooper career he was the statewide coordinator for the VPSO Program.

[9:19:54 AM](#)

VIVIAN KORTHUIS, Chief Executive Officer, Association of Village Council Presidents (AVCP), provided invited testimony during the presentation on rural public safety. She stated she is Yupik and a member of the Emmonak Tribe. She said public safety is the number one priority for the tribes in the AVCP region. She noted that AVCP is the largest tribal consortium in the nation, with 56 federally recognized tribes as members. The region is located on the Yukon-Kuskokwim (YK) Delta bordering the Yukon River, the Kuskokwim River, and the Bering Sea coast. She further noted that the AVCP region is about the same size as the state of Washington and is an off-road region, meaning the only way into the region is by flying or by barge in the summer. The only way to travel between the 48 physical communities in the region is by small plane, boat in the summer, or snow machine, trails, or ice roads in the winter. The population is approximately 26,000 people with a median age of 25.

MS. KORTHUIS stated that US Attorney General William Barr visited Alaska in 2019 and met with tribes and tribal leaders

who shared their stories and recommendations with him regarding public safety in rural Alaska. As a result, the Department of Justice declared a law enforcement emergency in rural Alaska, although [rural Alaskans] know that this public safety crisis has existed for years. She reported that there are rates of domestic violence and assault in the region's villages that are 10 times higher than the rest of the US. Most of the villages only have access to part-time law enforcement, and some rural communities, including the YK Delta, have no law enforcement at all. The Alaska State Troopers are only able to respond to serious felonies, she pointed out, and weather can delay responses for hours, days, or even weeks. She said it is unacceptable for [off-road communities] to not have the same access to public safety as communities on the road system.

9:24:22 AM

MS. KORTHUIS spoke to AVCP's Public Safety Initiative. She related that in 2016 AVCP's tribes determined public safety to be the region's number one priority, and since then AVCP has worked hard and strategically to address public safety. She said groundwork was laid in 2017 and 2018 when AVCP assessed the baseline of public safety in the region, which included assessing all public safety facilities in the region and its villages; meeting with tribes, local organizations, and state and federal enforcement agencies; and strategic planning with the state's VPSO tribal caucus. It was learned that a local law enforcement presence was needed in every community, the region's public safety buildings needed to be renovated or replaced, access was needed to comprehensive training for law enforcement, a sustained source of funding was needed, and clear tribal authority and jurisdiction was needed. Public safety in the AVCP region is basically absent, she stressed, and the region needs help. Strategies to improve public safety must be implemented at the tribal, state, and federal levels. She said it is the state's responsibility to address the lack of public safety head on.

MS. KORTHUIS expressed the strong support of AVCP and its tribes for the VPSO Program because it is known that local law enforcement in the community works. She stated that the VPSO Program has faced several challenges in the past several years, many of which reflect the national trends of law enforcement and some of which are unique to the VPSO Program. The challenges include difficulty in recruitment and retention, salaries below market compared to other states and local law enforcement positions, and the need for more flexibility to design programs



around regional needs, such as roving officers and flexible schedules. She said positive changes are being seen with the DPS Division of Administrative Services overseeing the program, and that there has been more flexibility in using VPSO funding to make improvements to public safety in the AVCP region. However, she stressed, progress must continue in addressing the issues that make it hard to recruit and retain VPSOs. She pointed out that VPSOs respond to calls in communities that are isolated and without backup and said VPSOs should be valued and compensated equally with their urban counterparts. She further stressed the need for continued and increased flexibility to use funding to address actual public safety needs of the communities that VPSOs serve. She said she wants to work towards having a line of recruits outside the VPSO coordinator's door.

9:28:42 AM

MS. KORTHUIS discussed the topic of investment in rural Alaska public safety infrastructure. She noted that one-third of all Alaskans live in rural Alaska, yet the difference between the investment in public safety infrastructure in rural Alaska and urban or road system communities is night and day. She related that most communities in the AVCP region do not have adequate public safety buildings, holding cells, or available housing for law enforcement officers. Tribes and village governments struggle to hire part-time law enforcement, pay for equipment and training, and maintain public safety buildings through a mix of grant applications, fund raising, and donations. She reported that in 2018 AVCP assessed the region's public safety infrastructure and found that 80 percent of its communities needed a public safety facility replaced, removed, renovated, or a new building constructed. She said it was also found that 26 communities had no public safety housing available. She added that AVCP partners with Yuut Elitnaurviat, the tribal training organization that provides village police officer (VPO) and tribal policy officer (TPO) training. She said AVCP recently secured funds to pilot a training program that adds an additional three weeks to the current two-week training course. Meanwhile, Ms. Korthuis continued, road system communities often enjoy state funded law enforcement whose officers have offices and comprehensive training. Allocation of funds shows priority, she stated, and right now public safety in rural Alaska does not appear to be a priority.

MS. KORTHUIS urged that the State of Alaska meet its obligation to keep rural Alaskans safe by thoroughly supporting the VPSO Program and by investing in public safety infrastructure. She



further urged that the state work closely with tribes as partners because they know the needs of their communities and what strategies will work to improve public safety. She said every village has a right hand and a left hand - a health aide and a VPSO. Whenever there is an emergency or trauma the first thing anyone does is call the health aide or VPSO. [Alaskans] are lucky to have a health care infrastructure that supports the health aides, she continued, but if a village does not have a public safety presence, "it's like trying to help people with one hand tied behind your back," which is not acceptable. She stated that tribes in rural Alaska are not asking for anything more or anything less than any other community in Alaska or the US regarding public safety.

[9:33:09 AM](#)

JASON WILSON, Public Safety Manager, VPSO Program, Central Council of Tlingit & Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska, provided invited testimony during the presentation on rural public safety. He stated that the Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska ("Tlingit & Haida") loves the VPSO Program. He said he has been the manager of this program for roughly 16 years over which time he has seen many different things and different directions. He noted he is Eagle Killer Whale and stated that Tlingit & Haida is the largest tribe in Alaska with over 32,000 enrolled citizens across the state, nation, and world. He related that only a handful of Tlingit & Haida's communities are connected to the road system, with most accessible only by boat or plane. He explained that the VPSO Program fills a critical need in those communities that don't have direct access to Alaska State Troopers or other public safety infrastructures. Tlingit & Haida runs the VPSO Program for the Southeast Alaska region, he continued, and has officers in the communities of Kake, Angoon, Pelican, Saxman, Hydaburg, Thorne Bay, and Kasaan.

MR. WILSON pointed out that VPSOs do many things in addition to law enforcement, such as: providing instruction in schools about water safety, hunter safety, and how criminal investigations are done; performing some DMV functions like issuing [drivers] licenses and ensuring cars are registered; responding to brown bears and wolves in the communities; responding to fires; acting as emergency medical technicians (EMTs); providing search and rescue; and acting as counselors. He said the strength is that a VPSO is a part of the community as well as a superhero in the community. Some VPSOs from

outside the community have even been adopted as members of the tribe, which is a huge honor.

9:38:28 AM

MR. WILSON announced that Tlingit & Haida just recently filled the vacancy in Hydaburg, and that there are two VPSOs in the communities of Kake, Angoon, and Thorne Bay. He added that he has applicants for the second VPSO position in the communities of Saxman and Hydaburg.

MR. WILSON stated that there are currently about 52 VPSOs with funding for about 68 this year, and at this time last year there were only 33 VPSOs. Improvements have been made, he said, but more are needed.

MR. WILSON addressed the challenge of recruitment and retention. Regarding planning, he said Tlingit & Haida has shifted gears in working with the state and other coordinators to create a recruitment officer position in which the person would work solely on filling positions throughout the entire program. Up to this point, he explained, recruitment has been put on the shoulders of the VPSO coordinators, which for certain coordinators might not be a strength. He said a look is also being taken at the possibility of finding more applicants by tapping into "headhunters" who find people to fill big positions as well as mid-level positions like the VPSO Program.

MR. WILSON related that a better job is now being done regarding infrastructure by addressing it as a program; for example, providing housing and public safety buildings in a community as a program.

MR. WILSON stated that Ms. Moore's testimony truly shows the importance and value of the VPSO Program in each community. He thanked Commissioner Cockrell and said working with the commissioner has been positive because the commissioner is open to working with the program. He said the VPSO Program can be made better, but it isn't broken. It faces challenges like any other program, but the lenses on the program are different. The best way to get better, he added, is by communicating better with the state and the partnering organizations.

9:44:57 AM

CHAIR ZULKOSKY inquired about the need for greater reliability in funding each year to support the public safety programs in each region.

MS. KORTHUIS answered that fiscal consistency would ensure AVCP could do appropriate planning, staffing, and budgeting on a year-to-year basis for all the services needed in the region. She said funding inconsistency is a challenge because AVCP is then unable to plan appropriately to meet the needs of public safety. This has been experienced over the last several years, she added, and the goal is to bring back that consistency.

MR. WALLNER explained that when funding is granted it goes to the [Department of Public Safety] and then to the statewide office. The statewide office determines how much funding goes to which organization; a routine practice every year. He reiterated that two of Chugachimiut's four villages are currently full and two are vacant. He said that for this fiscal year Chugachimiut received funding for three VPSO positions, creating the dilemma of not having the money for that fourth position. It is common practice that funding for many other needs for the program go neglected for the most part, he related, and Chugachimiut is using the funding for the two vacancies to accommodate equipment and other needs. Funding has always been an issue, he stated, and since funding varies from year-to-year Chugachimiut must make do with what it gets.

MR. WILSON stated that the responses of Ms. Korthuis and Mr. Wallner have answered the question.

REPRESENTATIVE CRONK remarked that he looks forward to talking to all the witnesses about the positive things and how to build on them to make this the best program.

CHAIR ZULKOSKY thanked the witnesses and said their testimony articulated how consequential the funding is of essential services across the state.

[9:51:06 AM](#)

#### **ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business before the committee, the House Special Committee on Tribal Affairs meeting was adjourned at 9:51 a.m.